



## Life in the Township

*This MysteryQuest investigates the society, culture, and economy of rural Ontario at the time of the Donnelly massacre. Students learn to gather evidence for their investigation by making inferences from the testimony of the only eyewitness to the massacre.*

*A critical thinking challenge to accompany*

***Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History***

***Heaven and Hell on Earth:  
The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys***

**<http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/10/indexen.html>**

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*based on an approach developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC<sup>2</sup>)*

**[www.tc2.ca](http://www.tc2.ca)**

### **Ages**

14-16

### **Courses**

Canadian history, civics

## Critical Challenge

Write a one-page background piece about life in Biddulph Township on the evidence of the testimony of James O'Connor, the only eyewitness to the Donnelly massacre.

## Broad Understanding

Students will learn that when looking at significant events, it is important to take into account societal structures and ideas in addition to individual actions.

## Requisite Tools



### *Background knowledge*

- knowledge of the Donnelly massacre
- knowledge of 19th century rural Ontario society



### *Criteria for judgment*

- criteria for an informative account (e.g., economic background of community, cultural composition of community, other social aspects of community or individuals involved)
- criteria for plausible inferences (e.g., supported by evidence, no alternative explanations)



### *Critical thinking vocabulary*

- inference
- evidence
- testimony



### *Thinking strategies*

- chart



### *Habits of mind*

- empathy

## Independent Study

This lesson can be used as a self-directed activity by having students individually or in pairs work their way through the guided instructions and support material found at <http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/10/indexen.html>.

## Whole Class Activities

On the following pages are suggested modifications of the self-guided procedures found on the MysteryQuest website for use with a class of students. For convenience, each support material and set of directions found on the website is reproduced next to the relevant suggestions for whole class instruction.

## Suggested Activities

### Introduce looking for clues

- Provide students with a picture from the newspaper and ask them to work in teams of three or four.
- Using the instructions for *Step 1: Learning to look for clues* as a guide, invite students to interpret the picture.
- Draw out the importance of using evidence to make inferences about time and place.

#### STEP 1: LEARNING TO LOOK FOR CLUES

We can learn much about something by looking for subtle clues. Consider a photo, for example. We may be able to infer the time of day by the shadows and by the activities people are performing in the picture, or infer the season by the kind of clothes people are wearing and by the growth stage of the vegetation.

Test your investigative abilities by working alone or with a partner to examine a photograph from the Donnelly website. For a simple picture, look at the photograph on the Welcome page of the website. This is a modern photograph of the road along which the Donnellys lived. For a more challenging picture, interpret the photograph on the Context page of the website. This is a 1880s picture of a market in London, Ontario, a town in the region where the Donnellys settled.

Your task is to look for clues to interpret the picture. Use the five Ws to structure your investigation:

- **Who** is (or would be) in the scene? (For example, who would live/work in this setting?)
- **What** is depicted? (For example, what is happening or being shown?)
- **Where** does it occur? (For example, in the country or city? Farmland or uncultivated land?)
- **Why** would these people or items be here? (For example, why would people have done or be doing this?)
- **When** does the scene occur? (For example, the hour? day? season?)

The point of this activity is for you to appreciate that by looking for clues, you can make inferences about the time and place. For example, what clues can your find to infer whether the road depicted in the picture is a main highway or a backroad?

### Introduce the massacre of the Donnellys

- Using *Introduction* as a guide, explain to students the incident and the challenge that are the focus of their investigation.
- Using *The Task* as a guide, outline the activities that students will undertake.
- You may want to download and display pictures of the township and other related events.

#### INTRODUCTION

Early in the morning of February 4, 1880, five members of an Irish immigrant family were murdered in rural southwestern Ontario, allegedly by an armed band of *vigilantes* from the community. No one was ever convicted of these crimes.

You will not be asked to determine who committed this crime, but to be a detective of another kind—to solve the kind of mystery that historians address when they use clues from the surviving historical record to piece together a picture of life in a former time and place. You will be provided with one historical document and asked to develop a background piece on life in the Donnellys' township that will help us understand the context for this violent episode in Canadian history.

#### THE TASK

In this MysteryQuest, you are going to take on the role of a historian of the Donnelly massacre in 1880. Your task is to write a one-page background piece about life in Biddulph Township based entirely on the sensational eyewitness account of the massacre by Johnny O'Connor, a boy of 12 who was hiding under the bed while the events of that night unfolded. You must find in his testimony as much evidence about life in Biddulph Township as you can, enough, at least, to write a one-page background piece.

Before writing the article, you will learn how to draw conclusions (more precisely known as "drawing inferences from clues"), first from a photograph on the Donnelly website and then from testimony given by a key witness. On the basis of this one document, you will prepare your account of the economy, culture, and society of nineteenth century Biddulph Township.

## Learn about the history of the event

- Using *Step 2: Learn about the history of the event* as a guide, duplicate and distribute copies of *The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys* to students, individually or in pairs. Use the briefing sheet to present the information about the Donnelly murder. Ask students how we know what happened that night. Explain that historians made inferences from evidence offered at the trial (primary documents) that allowed them to draw conclusions about what happened and why.

### STEP 2: LEARN ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE EVENT

Before looking at the primary documents from the trial, it will be useful for you to familiarize yourself with the events surrounding the Donnellys' murder. Read *The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys*.

In passing it is interesting to consider the basis upon which this brief history was developed. That is, how do we know about what happened that night? This story came from evidence that historians have found, particularly from evidence offered at the trials of those accused of murdering the Donnellys. In other words, historians made inferences from primary sources that allowed them to draw these inferences about what happened and why. You are about to do this very thing.

### MysteryQuest 10 Support Materials 1 (Briefing Sheet)

#### The Massacre of the “Black” Donnellys

The notorious Donnellys were an Irish family who emigrated from Tipperary, Ireland in the 1840s. Like thousands of other Irish immigrants fleeing the devastating potato famine, the extreme poverty and the social unrest in their home country, they settled in rural southern Ontario. The Donnellys took up land in Huron County, and chose to make their home along the Roman Line in Biddulph Township, so named by the Irish Roman Catholics who settled it. And the Donnellys, like most of their neighbours, were Roman Catholic immigrants from around Tipperary, Ireland. James and Johannah Donnelly became squatters (that is, people who took up their land without properly registering their ownership or paying for it).

By the 1850s, conflict, much of it violent, characterized life in Biddulph Township. The community was plagued by sheep killings, arson, numerous fights and brawls, and by murder. And by the 1850s, the Donnellys (and their children James Jr., William, John, Patrick, Michael, Robert, Thomas and Jenny) had established a reputation for picking a fight over just about anything. And some of the residents of the Roman Line in Biddulph Township (all of whom were Catholics), came to blame the Donnellys (Catholics, but friends with Protestants in the area) for every ill that befell the community. An old adage stated: “If a stone fell from heaven, they'd blame it on the Donnellys.” Troubles escalated in 1857 when James Donnelly Sr. killed Patrick Farrell, who had purchased the land the Donnelly clan had illegally called their own. To avoid punishment, James hid from authorities for almost a year, sometimes disguised as a woman. He eventually grew tired of the charade and turned himself in to the police. James Donnelly served seven years for his crime. The death of Patrick Farrell served only to strengthen some members of the community's hatred of the Donnellys. But, as court records confirm, the Donnellys were not alone in committing crimes; they lived in a community plagued by arson, assaults and a culture of violence.

The community was not satisfied at the way justice was administered through legal channels in Biddulph Township. A group of disgruntled townspeople established a vigilante committee as a substitute for a legal trial, conviction and sentencing. Their purpose was to punish the wayward Donnellys whose crimes had escalated in the 1870s. Finally, on February 4, 1880 the Donnelly farm was burned to the ground. The bodies of James, his beloved Johannah, son Tom and niece Bridget were in the ashes. Another son, John, lay dead in a separate murder the same night. Evidence suggested that a cruel and vicious mob, a breakaway group of a society called, ironically, “The Peace Society,” was to blame. Despite a great deal of evidence (including at least one eyewitness) and two trials, no one was ever found guilty of the crimes.

## Examine the testimony for clues

- Using *Step 3: Examine the testimony for clues* as a guide, duplicate and distribute copies of “O'Connor's testimony” (found in *Evidence in the Case*), or ask students to read this document online at <http://www.donnellys.com/History2.html>. Explain to students that they are to read the testimony and see how much they can learn about life in the community. Ask students to concentrate on finding information about the culture, daily life, and economy.
- Brainstorm criteria for a good newspaper background piece. When students have come up with a number of suggestions, review the following:
  - the economic background of the community;
  - the cultural composition of the community;
  - and other social aspects of the community or of the individuals involved that might help explain the community.

### STEP 3: EXAMINE THE TESTIMONY FOR CLUES

You are now going to see how much you can learn about life in the community from a single historical source — the testimony of Jim O'Connor, the only eyewitness to the murders. Carefully read O'Connor's testimony, found in *Evidence in the Case*. Concentrate on extracting clues on three topics:

- the economic background of the community (What were their occupations? How did they make a living? Were the people rich or poor?);
- the cultural composition of the community (Did ethnic tensions exist within the community?);
- and other social aspects of the community or of the individuals involved that might help explain daily life in the community (How did they treat each other?).

As you read the testimony, use the chart *Evidence About Life in the Township* to record your findings. In the first column, note any relevant statements from the testimony; in the second column, indicate the inference you might draw from this clue about life in the community. For example, Jim stated that he was given a whip to use on the pigs. This suggests that the Donnellys may not have been very gentle or kind to their farm animals. Record as much relevant information as you can find. You may need to use several copies of the chart to collect this information.

- Distribute a copy of the chart *Evidence about Life in the Township*. Direct students to record any relevant statements from the testimony in the first column and, in the second column, indicate the inference that might be drawn from it.

### Present your account of life at the time

- Using *Step 4: Present your account of life at the time* as a guide, instruct students to write a 250-word background piece using the evidence from Johnny O'Connor's testimony to build a picture of the economic, cultural, and social life of Biddulph Township.

**STEP 4: PRESENT YOUR ACCOUNT OF LIFE AT THE TIME**

Write your 250-word background piece, using the evidence from Johnny O'Connor's testimony to build a picture of the economic, cultural, and social life of Biddulph Township. Write your account in an interesting and clear manner.



MysteryQuest 10

Support Materials 2 (Activity Sheet)

#### Evidence about Life in the Township

Testimony	Inferences about Biddulph society
<i>Jim says he was given a whip to use on the pigs</i>	<i>The Donnelly's may not have been very gentle or kind to their farm animals</i>

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## Evaluation

- Use the rubric *Assessing Inferences Drawn from Evidence* to evaluate completion of the chart. Use the rubric *Assessing an Informative Account* to assess students' background piece.



MysteryQuest 10

Evaluation Materials 1 (Rubric)

#### Assessing Inferences Drawn from Evidence

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
<b>Identifies relevant and important evidence</b>	Identifies the most important and relevant statements in the documents.	Identifies the required number of relevant statements, including most of the important ones in the documents.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents, but the important ones are omitted.	Identifies some relevant statements in the documents, but some of the important ones are included.	Identifies no relevant statements in the documents.
<b>Draws plausible inferences</b>	Draws highly plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides convincing reasons for the inferences.	Draws plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides good reasons for the inferences.	Draws generally plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides reasons for some of the inferences.	Draws some plausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides little justification for the inferences.	Draws generally implausible inferences about the implications of the statements; provides very little justification for the inferences.

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Evaluation Materials 2 (Rubric)

#### Assessing an Informative Account

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
<b>Provides abundant plausible information</b>	Provides abundant, highly plausible information about the topic.	Provides considerable information that is generally very plausible.	Provides sufficient information that is generally plausible.	Provides minimally adequate information that is seldom plausible.	Provides very limited information that is seldom plausible.
<b>Communicates clearly and in an interesting manner</b>	Is written in a very clear and especially interesting manner.	Is written clearly and is generally interesting.	Is generally clear and contains a number of interesting details.	Some ideas are clearly expressed and contain a few interesting details.	Account is generally unclear and not interesting.

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## Extension

- Invite students to work individually or as a class to pursue the suggested activities listed in *Extension*.

### EXTENSION

#### *Look for additional evidence*

Select two or three documents about the Donnellys' murder to see if they add to, or refute, the information about life in the community that you gleaned from the testimony by Johnny O'Connor. Choose your documents by going to the following links:

[Trial One](#)

[Trial Two](#)

#### *Test out your inferences*

Look at other accounts, Context and Prelude, developed by historians about the social, political, cultural, and economic context of the massacre. Compare the inferences you drew based on the one historical document you considered to see how accurate and complete your inferences were about life in the community.

#### *Learn more about the Donnellys*

Apply your detective skills to another MysteryQuest associated with the Donnelly murders. This challenge invites you to explore what the underlying causes for these brutal murders were.